Improving Ethics Quality: Looking Beneath the Surface

Only about 10 percent of an iceberg is actually visible above the waterline—the greatest part of its mass lies hidden below the ocean surface. Mariners ignore that submerged mass at their peril.

Ethics quality in health care can be described in much the same way: Some ethical practices are readily visible; others become apparent only when we make an effort to see them. But what is usually unseen is often the most important determinant of ethical practice overall.

At the surface of health care ethics we can easily observe decisions and actions, and the events that follow from them, in the day-to-day practices of clinicians and administrators. Beneath this, however, organizational systems and processes drive decision making. Not immediately visible in themselves, these organizational factors become apparent when we look for them, for example, when we examine patterns and trends in requests for ethics consultations.

Deeper still lie the organization's health care ethics environment and culture, which powerfully, but nearly imperceptibly shape its ethical practices overall. This deepest level of organizational values, understandings, assumptions, habits, and unspoken messages—what people in the organization know but rarely make explicit—is critically important since it is the foundation for everything else. Yet because it is only revealed through deliberate and careful observation, it is often overlooked.

Together, these three levels—decisions and actions, systems and processes, and environment and culture—define the ethics quality of a health care organization.

Many ethics programs make the mistake of focusing on what is immediately apparent. They spend most of their time reacting to only the most visible of ethics concerns. But to have a lasting impact on ethics quality, ethics programs must do more: They must continuously look beneath the surface to identify and address the deeper organizational factors that influence observable practices. Only then will ethics programs be successful in promoting ethical health care practices organization-wide.